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SEASONAL OCCUPATION IN THE BUILDING TRADES—CAUSES AND EFFECTS

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Uncertainty of employment is a nightmare which perpetually haunts the average workingman. No work is the hardest work, if we may use a paradox. The problem of the casual laborer is becoming more acute with each passing year and unless a solution is found in the near future, it threatens the very life of our present industrial system.

It is not the intention in the present article to deal with this problem in its entirety, but rather with that phase of it which is confined to the building industry. It might be shown that the casual laborer is, to a large extent, the product of our industrial system. Reared in the midst of unhealthful, insanitary surroundings, he has never been given a fair chance in life. When he entered the factory the pace soon became too fierce for his physical endurance; he lost one job after another and finally was thrust aside into that group of casual laborers which is ever increasing in numbers.

The army of the unemployed seen in our large cities is not composed of "never-works" as is often asserted by the ill-informed. In large part it is composed of the weaklings, unable to maintain the pace in the struggle for bread, and of the maimed and crippled, who, when their earning power was cut off by an industrial accident, were thrown on the human scrap-pile to shift for themselves as best they could. In addition to those, however, the army of the unemployed contains many men, strong and willing to work who are denied the opportunity.

Seasonal occupation in the building trades may be attributed to a number of causes, principal among them being:

1. Custom, which arbitrarily makes certain seasons of the year "renting" seasons.
2. Commercialism, which makes quick returns on investments the foremost consideration.

3. Reluctance to spend money until absolutely necessary, which develops the habit of putting off until to-morrow that which should be done to-day.

4. Climatic conditions.

"Busy" seasons in the building trades are artificially created.

They are the result of customs which do not seem to answer any particular purpose. Some of these customs originated at a time when conditions were different from what they are to-day and we seem to accept them as a matter of course. Not only do they not answer any good purpose, but they work hardship on both employers and employees.

In the days when the steam-heated apartment was unknown, there might have been good reasons for having interior decorating done only in the summer months. Those reasons do not apply to-day. It is a custom which makes the owner of a building wait until the beginning of May to have his home or office building renovated and decorated. We arbitrarily, in many cities at least, make May 1 "moving day." Leases are made out to expire April 30. The moving germ, which we perhaps have inherited from nomadic days, is kept alive and fostered by custom to break out in virulent form at about the same time every year. There may be some doubt as to whether landlords make out leases to suit the habits of the people, or whether the habits are a result of the leases, but there is no doubt that the custom imposes hardships on every one concerned. The landlord and the tenant both have to pay more for labor because of the abnormal demand for it at that particular time. In a lesser degree similar conditions prevail about October 1, which also is made a renting season. This gives us the spring and fall rush seasons in the building trades.

To illustrate this more clearly the working conditions of the paperhanger may be shown. Paperhanging is a special branch of the painting and decorating trade and with the specialization of industry has come to be regarded as a trade by itself. The paperhanger does not look for work at his trade during the months of December, January and February. He has learned by experience that there is no work for him in those months. He endeavors to find work in a factory, or on street-cars or elevated railroads. If he is successful, as usually is the case, some less efficient worker is crowded out to make room for him. The unfortunate worker joins

the ranks of the unemployed army. In March or April the paperhanger quits his temporary job and returns to work at his trade and by May 1 he is working almost night and day. There appears no good reason why part of the work the paperhanger does in May might not have been done as well in January, except the custom referred to.

What has been said of the paperhanger applies generally to the other building trades. The whole industry revolves around the renting seasons, always with the same results, namely, the concentrating into a few weeks work that should be spread over months; the scarcity of skilled workmen for a short time at the height of the season and a surplus of labor when the height of the season has passed.

Taking up the second cause of seasonal occupation we find it intimately co-related to the first. The desire for quick returns on investments would not affect the building trades workman were it not for the renting seasons spoken of. Taken in conjunction with the renting seasons, however, it does have a material effect on his welfare.

Builders who invest capital in buildings for renting purposes make their calculations on the time required for construction with the utmost precision. The calculations are, of course, governed by the character of the building and may be two, three, or six months or longer but always with the renting season in view. If the building is a small apartment house, the builder may calculate that under favorable circumstances he can complete it in two months and have it ready for renting May 1. Three months would be a safer calculation but there would be an extra month's interest on the investment before returns would begin to come in. It would not benefit the builder to have it completed April 1 for he would have small chance of renting it. He wants to have the tenants move in the day the workmen move out. As a matter of fact the tenant frequently moves in before the building is completed. The result is the usual rush and overtime work with the consequent inferior workmanship. The same rule applies to office buildings as well as dwelling houses. The business man who rents offices adheres as religiously to the "moving" habit as does the flat dweller.

The habit mentioned as the third cause of seasonal occupation may be illustrated by the steamfitter. We have seen that the paper-

hanger does not expect to work at his trade during the months of December, January and February. The steamfitter has his dull season during the months of June, July and August. It is true that these months are dull for most of the building trades workmen, for the spring season is over and the fall season has not commenced. The steamfitter serves, however, for the purpose of illustration.

At the close of winter the owner of a residence determines to have his furnace replaced by a hot-water plant. The change has become necessary and he has fully made his mind up on that point. He seldom, however, has the work done in the summer months when the steamfitter needs work. Instead he puts it off until the arrival of the first cold weather and then he wants the work completed in a day. There are thousands of others in just the same position. This particular house owner cannot understand why steamfitting contractors give so little attention to him. He is ready to pay the price and cannot see why he should have to wait.

When ultimately he finds a contractor to do the work he notices that the journeyman steamfitter goes at his task in a very deliberate fashion. The steamfitter does not seem to hurry at all and the owner is paying perhaps as much as \$10.00 a day for the steamfitter and his helper. He complains that he is being robbed and that steamfitters are the laziest workmen on earth. If he had installed that plant in July the labor cost that he would have saved would have been much greater than the interest on the money for the two or three months that he kept putting it off. In July the workmen would have been more industrious. Where the steamfitters are organized the wages would have been the same in July as in November, but the amount of work done per day would, in all probability, have been materially different. It is natural for the steamfitter to feel secure when he knows there is not an idle man in his trade in the city. In the dull season it would have been different, for then he had the competition of the idle man on the street to reckon with. That fear of competition would have proved incentive enough to make him work to his full capacity.

Climatic conditions may be said to be beyond human control but only in a slight degree are they responsible for the seasonal nature of work in the building industry. Outdoor work in the month of January in a temperate climate is at times impossible. Frequently it is unprofitable for employers and not congenial to

workmen. Only a few trades, however, like bricklayers, structural ironworkers and carpenters are affected directly by weather conditions. It is true that their work must precede the interior work done by men in other trades, but this cause of seasonal occupation is so unimportant when compared with other causes that it need hardly be taken into consideration. The fact that with nearly all the building trades there is a dull season in the midsummer months, proves that the causes for enforced idleness are artificial and are, therefore, capable of being changed.

What are the effects of this seasonal employment on the workers? We are accustomed to hear employers complain that workmen are interested in their work only for the wages they get. Whether the charge is wholly true or not, the uncertain nature of the building workman's employment has a tendency to create such a condition in him. It is no reflection on the ability of a bricklayer, or a carpenter that he may work for a dozen employers in the course of a year. Under such circumstances it is hardly conceivable that he can have much personal interest in any one of his employers. He does not become attached to his job as might an iron molder or a machinist. He knows that as soon as the particular building on which he is working is completed, he will, as a rule, have to look for another job, no matter how efficient he may be. The building contractor cannot, like the manufacturer, in a dull season reduce working hours or manufacture stock to keep his gang together. This causes a large number of building mechanics to be constantly out of employment, even in the busiest seasons. The individual may be idle but a day or less, but in the aggregate it means that hundreds in a large city are constantly in a state of transition from one building to another. It is largely due to this condition that the union headquarters has become an employment office through which contractors and workmen are brought together with the least possible loss of time.

The uncertain nature of the building mechanic's employment is no doubt one of the reasons why he is better organized than other classes of workmen. The strongest unions are among the building trades and while there are other reasons for that, the constant changing of employers is one of the primary causes of good organization. The workman neither seeks nor expects any favors from his employer and relies on his union for protection.

Another effect of the uncertain employment is that it is apt to make workmen thriftless. There is nothing so calculated to break down moral standards as enforced idleness. Few workmen in the building trades would be willing to admit that they are thriftless. The answer given by an intelligent workman to the question: "Does the uncertain nature of the work in your trade make the men thriftless?" will illustrate the view they take of it.

"No," this man replied, "I wouldn't like to put it that way. I have observed, though," he continued "that the men in our trade are more thrifty and industrious now that they receive high wages than they were twenty years ago when they worked for much less."

"The high wages have a tendency to make them thrifty?"

"That undoubtedly is the case."

"Then, if they are more thrifty because the wages are higher per day, would not the same thing apply if the wages were higher per year, which they would be with steadier employment?"

"Well, if you put it that way I have no doubt they would, but I wouldn't call them thriftless."

If we accept this workman's view, which is typical, it would be that building mechanics are thrifty now, but would be more so if they had steadier employment.

It is a fact that most workmen live pretty close to their income and that it costs them more to live when they are idle than when they are working. This is readily understood. At work they have few opportunities to spend money; searching for employment and meeting acquaintances they have many. Moral standards are unconsciously weakened or broken down in this way.

It might be imagined that the periods of idleness are blessings in disguise to the workman, in that they break the monotony of the steady grind. That is not true. Enforced idleness is not conducive to rest either of mind or body. The uncertainty of "where the next month's rent is to come from" preys on the mind of the idle workman. The phrase quoted is common among the workmen and is used to show a condition rather than because of its literal truth. It is the steady income that counts and this is shown by the readiness with which a competent thrifty building mechanic will accept a steady position at a much lower daily rate of wages than he receives at his trade. A carpenter who can earn from \$4.50 to 5.00 a day while employed by a contractor, will readily accept a position as a

house carpenter in an office building or department store where the wages may be \$75.00 a month and he will consider himself a large gainer thereby.

The paperhanger has been shown to go outside his trade in the dull season and get other employment. He is the exception in that. Few other skilled workmen do. One reason is that the skilled craftsman has little confidence in his ability outside of his trade. Another reason is that there always is some work going on, even in the dull seasons, and he may be lucky enough to get a share of it. The paperhanger knows he will be idle if he does not get work outside his trade. The carpenter, plumber or plasterer is different. Some work is being done in his line and while his chance of getting a share of it may not be better than one in three, there is still a chance. If he works one week in four during the dull season he considers himself fairly lucky and manages to get along.

To what extent this uncertain employment affects the annual income of the building trades workman, or how much of it is due to the dull seasons referred to, it is difficult to determine accurately. There is one union in the United States in the building trades—the Amalgamated Society of Carpenters and Joiners—which pays its members an out-of-work benefit. It is the only union in the building industry which does, but what is true of carpenters would apply generally to other building trades.

The rules of the organization referred to provide that a member may receive twelve weeks' full benefit and twelve weeks' partial benefit in any one year. This means twenty-four weeks' benefit in each fifty-two weeks. When a member is shown in receipt of partial benefit, that in itself is *prima facie* evidence that he must have drawn twelve weeks' full benefit within the previous twelve months. The following table, taken from the official reports of this union for the past year, will show to what extent its members were unemployed. It already has been noted that February is a dull month, that June also is dull following the spring rush season and that September is a busy month, as it is the height of the fall rush season. Following are the figures for the three months mentioned and they are not confined to any one city but cover the whole United States:

Month.	Number of Members.	Full Benefit.	Per Cent.	Partial Benefit.	Per Cent.
February, 1908	3,496	1,024	29.2	248	7.09
June, 1908	3,350	356	10.6	233	6.9
September, 1908	3,123	176	5.6	125	4.

While the foregoing table is accurate, and is interesting as showing the proportion of members on partial benefit which, as already explained, proves that they must have drawn twelve weeks' full benefit in the previous year, it does not tell the whole story. Last year was an exceptionally bad one in the building industry following the financial panic and that should be given consideration. On the other hand, many members entitled to benefit do not claim it and the rules provide that a member must be four successive days out of employment, or four days in one week before he becomes entitled to benefit. The figures, therefore, do not show the short periods of lost time of less than four days' duration. They do not show conclusively every idle workman for periods longer than four days, but they do prove that the proportion of idleness cannot be less than is shown, while it undoubtedly is considerably greater.

Can anything be done to remedy the conditions shown?

As long as wages are paid by the hour, workmen will be laid off for short periods, even when not out of a job. Neither employers nor workmen want a change in the system of payment. The piece-work system will not be tolerated by the unions as they have found it bad from every standpoint. Owing to conditions peculiar to the industry, it is not practicable to pay wages by the week, or even by the day. The hour system has been found best for all interests, so that it is likely to continue. It seems improbable that anything can be done to remedy this "broken time" which has a serious effect on the annual income of the building trades workman.

The "dull" seasons and the "busy" seasons, which are artificially created, might be remedied by a more sensible distribution of the work. There is no good reason why leases should expire April 30 rather than at any other time. Even where tenants take possession of new buildings in October which is a prevailing custom, the leases commonly are drawn to expire the following April.

It is doubtful whether the custom of delaying the commencement of a building in order to save a month's interest on the investment is an economical one. If the builder, instead of crowding work-

men on a building so that they are literally in the way of one another, would extend the period of construction over a few more months, he would get better work, he would have less cause to complain about the scarcity of help at certain periods and the workmen would be greatly benefited by having a more regular income.